For all the saints
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
October 25, 2026

My apologies to the one for whom this congregation is named, but I have never been a fan of adding "Saint," upper case "S" Saint, as a title, before anyone's name — St. Brendan, St. Columba, St. Francis, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Catherine, St. Teresa, St. Brigid. Why not simply Brendan, Francis, Peter, Catherine, Teresa, Brigid. Why not Elaine, Nancy, Mickey, Bill, Allen, John? Because you are saints, too! And that's the point.

The word "saint" (αγιοσ) in the New Testament is never used in the singular to refer to a particular individual, but always in the plural (αγιοι) to speak of the members, all the members, of the community gathered in Jesus' name. When we use "Saint" as a title, uppercase "S," we make of the person to whom we attach it someone larger than life, someone above and beyond you and me, someone we can certainly admire, but would never think of trying to emulate. It makes too much of what is, for Brendan or Francis or Teresa, an ordinary life, an ordinary life lived well, but lived well within the possibilities available to any of us, and a life certainly as flawed and fragile and fearful as any of our lives. Or, to put it another way, it makes too little of what is given to each of us, a life of extraordinary possibility, a life of extraordinary wonder.

Our Bible does a good job, a particularly good job, of not painting its protagonists as superheroes. They are not heroes at all, simply women and men caught up in the human story, the story of living the lives gifted and guided and graced by the presence of the living God.

Think of Abraham, father to the Hebrew nation, passing off his wife as his sister for his own protection, banishing Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness.

Or think of David, the one called "a man after God's own heart," but also an adulterer and a murderer. Do you suppose that when Jesus posed that riddle to the Pharisees — "if David thus calls [the Messiah] Lord, how can he be his son?" — do you suppose he was not merely trying to befuddle the Pharisees, but also reminding them not to make too much of David?

Or think of Moses, the Moses celebrated at the end of the book of Deuteronomy as "unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform," the Moses proclaimed as a prophet like no other: "never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face," high praise for the one revered by succeeding generations as the savior and founder of the nation of Israel.

And yet, he was not. Moses was not the savior nor the founder of his people. He was a man, an ordinary man, flawed, fragile, fearful, tasked by the One who is

the savior and founder of the Hebrew nation, tasked by the One who is the savior and founder of all nations, tasked with leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt, through a wilderness of trouble and pain, into the land promised them. If this was indeed a story about Moses, the story of a hero's triumphant deeds, how do you suppose it might end? Wouldn't it end with Moses marching at the head of his people, holding his rod high as his feet first touch down on the west bank of the Jordan?

But Moses' story ends east of the Jordan River, high on a mountain top in Moab. Moab is where Moses died, never setting foot in the land of promise, and Moab is where Moses was buried in an unknown grave. Moses was indeed a prophet, a powerful witness to the ways and the will of the living God, but Moses was a man, a human being, a mortal who was mourned, yes, but then left behind as the story of God's people moved forward. Moses was a man, a human being, a mortal, like me, like you.

It must have been quite a view, the view from the top of that mountain, from the summit of Mt. Nebo rising some twenty-three hundred feet above the plains of Moab at the eastern edge of the Jordan Valley. *Y*ou could see for yourself, of course, because Mt. Nebo is still there, in Jordan, about twenty miles south of Amman and thirty miles east of Jerusalem. From there, you could see what Moses saw, the Jordan Valley spreading out before you, flanked by mountain ranges north and west and by the desert and the Dead Sea to the south.

You could look north as Moses did, toward Gilead and Galilee, west toward Jerusalem and the lands to be named for the tribes that will settle there — Judah and Ephraim and Manasseh. You could look south toward the Negeb, the desert, and Zoar at the southern tip of the Dead Sea.

From the top of the mountain, Moses could see it, all the land that he and the Hebrew refugees with him had waited forty years to see. He could see it! At last, he could see it. It had been more than a struggle to get there, half a lifetime of ordeal and peril and hunger and doubt for Moses and the Hebrew people: hurriedly fleeing Egypt with Pharaoh's armies at their heels, wandering endlessly in a barren wilderness with little to eat or drink, suffering attack after attack by the people of the lands through which they traveled.

For Moses in particular, it had been a struggle, a long and fraught journey, the last long chapter of what must have seemed to him like three lifetimes. Saved from a kill order at his birth, there was his first life, growing into manhood as a member of the Egyptian court, living a life of privilege and possibility and ease, but unease, too, torn between two conflicting identities, disturbed by the suffering of his birth-people, suffering he saw, but did not share.

After personally taking vengeance upon a murderous Egyptian slave-master, Moses fled Egypt and settled in Midian, living his second and what may well

have been his best life, quietly tending sheep, taking a wife, raising a family, living a life happy and peaceful and blessedly uneventful. And then, God. And then, God. God confronting him, God commissioning him, God cajoling him, until finally Moses reluctantly agreed to return to Egypt to ask the king to let God's people go.

Then came Moses' third life, the most difficult and dangerous and thankless of all. Confronting the hard-hearted ruler of the mighty Egyptian empire was one thing, but that must have seemed a walk in the park compared to dealing with the relentless grousing and complaining and cowardice and ingratitude and bitterness and faithlessness of Moses' own people. Oh, how they longed to be slaves again, they said, more than happy to trade in the demands and risks of freedom for the easy and predictable misery of vassal servitude in Egypt!

It had been a long and agonizing journey, so it must have been an especially sweet view for Moses, knowing he had persisted, knowing that he had endured, knowing that he had succeeded in fulfilling his mission, God's mission, bringing the people of the covenant to the brink of the land of promise. But the view was bittersweet, because Moses would not enter that land. He could see it, but he would never set foot there, never make his bed there, never settle his family there, not be buried there.

Moses never crossed the finish line, never stood on the victor's platform, never reaped the rewards of a job well done. His only reward was to be remembered, to be remembered as God's faithful prophet, one who performed signs and wonders like no other — not least of which was somehow managing to manage an unmanageable people! — and to be remembered as one whom the Lord knew, face to face. Face to face. To know and to be known. To be present to God and to be in God's presence. Is this what it means to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind? To listen and speak, to know and be known? To seek above all else and to find, or rather to be gifted, that kind of intimacy? Moses stood atop the mountain and saw the land. He saw the land of promise and then he died.

We are like Moses. My friends, we are like Moses, entirely, completely. There is nothing that Moses saw that we cannot see, nothing that Moses did that we cannot do, no relationship with God that Moses had that we cannot have. There is nothing that Moses saw that we cannot see, nothing that Moses did that we cannot do, no relationship with God that Moses had that we cannot have

We are like Moses. We too have our Midian times, times of honest work and a satisfying home life, times of blessing and contentment and peace. And we have our Egypt times, times of struggle and doubt and concern, seeing suffering and oppression and injustice all around us, feeling powerless and overwhelmed and

beyond discouraged. And, sometimes, like for me right now and maybe for you, too, we have both at the same time.

We are like Moses. We struggle with obstinance, with disbelief, with failure of courage, with bitterness and apathy, both in those we watch, but also in ourselves. Like Moses, we hesitate, we protest, we too would much prefer to stay home tending sheep and sitting down at the supper table with loved ones and forget all about Egypt, forget all about the suffering, all the suffering we see, but do not share.

But we are like Moses. Like Moses, we are commissioned by God. Like Moses, we are called by God, called to journey through the wilderness, struggling to reach the promised land and taking with us as many people as we can. Our true home is there. That's where we belong. That's where all of us belong, in the land of promise, the peaceable kingdom, the realm of shalom, a realm not somewhere else, but here, this place, this world, as it will be when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

That is our home, but we are like Moses. We will not get there. We will not enter it. You and I will not enter that promised land. But we can see it!

We can see it! We must see it! We must let the Lord lead us to the top the mountain and show us the view! The view is everything. The view is the reality that what God has promised will be … will be. The way of shalom, the path of peace, is not the stuff of vain wishes and hopeless dreams. It is God's promise. It is what will be. It is where God is leading us. And we can see it!

But before we get there, before we reach that land of promise, we will die. You and I will die. You and I will not see the fulfillment of peace on earth. We will be mourned, but life will go on, and, Lord willing, other saints, people like me and people like you, will hear the call and join the struggle and help lead God's people toward the land of promise, just as Joshua took up where Moses left off. But, remember, it <u>is</u> there. You can see it!

You and I will die, but right now, before we die, we have the honor and privilege of living the extraordinary lives of ordinary people called by God, not making too little of the momentous task with which we have been entrusted, but also not making too much of our role in it. We matter, but we are ones among many who matter, ones among all the many saints who matter, and it is wisdom to know that our place in this world is small and our time in this world is short.

The psalm we heard this morning has been attributed to Moses. Whether it comes from Moses or not, it does express what he came to understand well, that our lives are filled with struggle and grief and soon, so soon, over. That is simply how it is. But, too, as Moses came to understand and as we may also

come to understand, though we may not reach the home toward which we have been journeying, we have indeed been home all along …

O Lord, you have always been our home.
Before you created the hills
or brought the world into being,
you were eternally God,
and will be God forever.

You tell us to return to what we were;
you change us back to dust.
A thousand years to you are like one day;
they are like yesterday, already gone,
like a short hour in the night.
You carry us away like a flood;
we last no longer than a dream.
We are like weeds that sprout in the morning,
that grow and burst into bloom,
then dry up and die in the evening.

We are destroyed by your anger;
we are terrified by your fury.
You place our sins before you,
our secret sins where you can see them.

Our life is cut short by your anger;
it fades away like a whisper.
Seventy years is all we have—
eighty years, if we are strong;
yet all they bring us is trouble and sorrow;
life is soon over, and we are gone.

Who has felt the full power of your anger?
Who knows what fear your fury can bring?
Teach us how short our life is,
so that we may become wise.

Teach us how short our life is — this bittersweet life filled with wonder and pain, glory and sorrow, intimacy and longing, failure and fulfillment, doubt and absolute certainty — teach us how short our life is, so that we may become wise.

Rev. Timothy Ensworth